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LOST PRIORITIES

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A review of the administration's National Security Strategy highlights our inability to identify what's really important and focus our limited resources on accomplishing the essential tasks required to achieve desired objectives Our six strategic priorities fail to accomplish the intent of a priority list—provide choice when confronted with fewer means than required to meet objectives The purpose of this paper is to outline the major contributing factors to our ineffective priority list and propose required changes, if we want a priority list that minimizes contradiction, maximizes effectiveness, focuses our strategy, and produces policy that meets our objectives

The stated priority list requires significant changes if we want something more than just another list However, a priority list is the result of a sound, systematic development of national interests, objectives and allocating resources to meet desired objectives This critical work lacks precision in our current National Security Strategy Specifically, interests and objectives are too loosely defined, the link between available resources and objectives is not evident, and priorities are not focused

First, we define three types of interests vital, important and humanitarian While the definitions sound good, they are generally ignored in Section III, the section that should tailor our strategy to each region In fact, vital interests with respect to Europe and the NIS are the only interest mentioned in the entire section Does this mean the U S has no vital interests in Asia or the Middle East? Using the definition of vital, one could argue that's not the case

Additionally, there is no mention of important or humanitarian interests in any of the regional discussions The regional views introduce new terms and other interests

This list includes, an "overarching U S interest"[1] in China, a "strategic interest in Southeast Asia,"[2] and "enduring interest"[3] in the Middle East So does this mean that China is our number one interest and that we'll always have some type of interest in the Middle East? I don't know, but I believe that proper definition of interests is a critical first step Using a priority list to assist in balancing means to meet ends requires firmly grounded interests Inconsistencies in definition lead to inconsistent thought and make it hard to clearly define objectives

If we expect objectives to serve our interests and lead to a useful priority list, then the objectives must be written in a way that allow us to adequately assess effectiveness Our stated objectives to enhance security, bolster the economy, and promote democracy lack the precision required to conduct reasonable assessments An objective written with precision allows us to assess three components suitability, feasibility and acceptability.

Suitable objectives require sufficient precision for the leadership to recognize that's what they want and that the objectives support their vision If not, how will you know when you're there and how do you assess your status along the way? Objectives must have sufficient precision to ensure you can assess feasibility, they must be realistic and affordable This keeps you in the realm of the possible Finally objectives must be clear enough to assess acceptability Is this objective acceptable to the American public as well as other affected parties? In my view, our objectives are generally written in "Mom and apple pie" terms that have always been and will probably continue to be our

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[1] A National Security Strategy for a New Century (Washington, D.C The White House, May 1997) 24

[2] Ibid

[3] Ibid , 26

general objectives Until properly completed and written in sufficient detail to allow an adequate assessment, our priority list is relatively useless

The hard work associated with clearly defining objectives is the feasibility step--specifically allocating resources to accomplish a realistic objective My assessment of the objectives is that our strategy tends to want to do everything, utilize all tools of statecraft and generally fails to consider resource constraints A simple example can be seen by a review of the security objective with respect to the use of military activities The strategy says we can expect to use military resources to shape the environment and to respond to crises, while preparing for the future The details of this section clearly have the military doing more with less For the Army alone, missions have increased in an effort to meet all the shaping missions while the budget has significantly decreased and modernization has continued to lag This do-it-all approach invalidates a priority list

The result of poorly defined interests and objectives, coupled with an unrealistic view of resources, is an unfocused priority list This can be seen by a quick review of the priority list Specifically, there are too many priorities without considering the impact of making each a priority, there is too much room for interpretation between some priorities and the desired objectives, and one priority is counter to our objectives

Too many priorities risks allocating resources to more urgent tasks and less important tasks in an unorchestrated way For example, our number one priority to "foster a peaceful, undivided, democratic Europe"[4], if analyzed in detail with a clearly defined security objective, could take the majority of our available resources There are many significant issues related to this priority that will require all tools of statecraft if we really intend to meet this vital objective—enlargement, ethnic issues, various country

interests, EU, Bosnia, NIS, Russia I'm not arguing that this should be our only priority but we need to assess how we want to influence the action in a vital Europe Obviously devoting more resources to lower priorities provides fewer resources for Europe If we're not careful, when we really need resources for Europe they may not be available

Establishing priorities without considering the impact is amplified by two priorities that are essentially blank checks "Keep America the world's leading force for peace," and ' increase cooperation in confronting security threats that disregard national borders,"[5] are too broad While they support our security objective, they essentially say we're prepared to go anywhere, at anytime Some could argue these objectives provide flexibility I'd say this is an inability for us to focus our priorities, to add rigor to our work, and to say no when required This can lead to inconsistent and incoherent strategy For example, why support Somalia and Haiti but not Algeria?

Finally, our sixth priority, "strengthen the diplomatic and military tools required to address these challenges,"[6] is counter to our objectives and our current actions Given our current objectives, how can this be the last priority? However, since it is a priority one would think that there would be more resources instead of less as we see in today's diplomatic and military budgets

So, how do we develop a useful priority list that is not lost somewhere between means and ends? I believe this requires proactive leaders prepared to deal with the complexity of the system, managers conducting the detailed analysis required for tough decisions, and a strategy that retains sufficient flexibility to deal with unknowns

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[4] Ibid , 29
[5] Ibid

The leadership must tackle complexity by first establishing a vision of where they want to be A vision is a simple, consistent, and easy to understand message that can sound like the obvious and doesn't need to sound brilliant I can't find that in our current strategy Second, the leadership must define broad enduring objectives that focus the planning Those things that will help achieve the vision Here our objectives of enhancing security, bolstering our economy and promoting democracy is a good start point but now requires more detailed work before determining a priority list

Our current strategy does not suggest that this detailed work has been done This is management work that must articulate specific, quantifiable, measurable objectives that are linked to a critical analysis of threats and interests, and that seriously consider resource requirements This tough work would add clarity and focus to priorities

Once completed, I believe our priority list must be short Today's world requires us to maintain flexibility A short priority list accomplishes several missions—focuses on the important, sends a clear message to the world, allows us to pursue objectives in a coherent and consistent way and above all increases our flexibility Fewer priorities reduce the chance of overcommitment and increase the chance of having an ability to react to unforeseen events This flexibility must be a central component to any strategy developed in today's world To maintain flexibility I would initially focus only on vital interests to security and enhancing economic prosperity, while telling the rest of the world to standby There are probably several other things I want to do but until I focus the security and prosperity efforts, I want to be cautious on how I want to promote democracy throughout the world

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[6] Ibid